

## **Fifty-Five Plus**

I phoned one of those murder-scene-scrubbing companies to clean up the blood and guts. It was, after all, a murder.

When screams echoed against the pristine stucco walls lining quaint Littler Lane, all the neighbors came running. Including me. Well, I didn't exactly run. I merely hopped across our shared brick walkway, where our locked front doors had ignored each other for the past eleven years.

My neighbor's name always escaped me. Was it April, May, or June? Fearing I'd call her by the wrong month, I'd mutter, "Afternoon, Spring," whenever we crossed paths, which was with purposeful infrequency. On my part, anyway. Unlike 'Spring,' walking her predictable route to the Club for her daily swim, I did what I wanted when I wanted. I swam when the mood struck, not at ten o'clock every single morning. Retirement offered perks and I lived on a string of whims.

Back in medieval times, as a fledgling third grade teacher, learning each of my pupils' names became key to my survival. Knowing Bobby from Jane from Michael was critical to my goal of taming the beastly nature of my feral wards. And tame them, I did. My pupils grew up to be decent taxpayers. Sure, some turned out petty criminals. And there was that one pedophile. But overall, they learned well from their master. Those days are gone, along with hunks of my memory. I can recall my very own first principal's name. But I couldn't remember

the name of my neighbor of eleven years.

I'd bought in to the community for what the Realtor had called *glorious silence*. Then Charlie arrived. Yapping was his norm. But on murder day, his staccato bark was frantic. Until *glorious silence* momentarily returned.

Après swim, that's when 'Spring's' screaming started. And the neighbors came running.

Inside her gaping front door, a battered mesh bag slumped against the baseboard. A wet spot beneath it seeped onto her new bamboo floors. Above the blossoming puddle, a plumeria-emblazoned ceramic plaque demanded politely: *Maholo for Removing Your Shoes*. Yes, her flowery message contained a typo. But on this horrific day, who would have the heart to tell her.

Blood puckered on the pale bamboo. Spring paced her living room, a gray braid pinned in a damp swirl round her head, her stout figure ensconced in a white robe. Many residents, overly familiar with one another, typically travelled to and from the Club in varying degrees of pajamas. I'll be damned if anyone will ever catch me walking to the Club in a housecoat. I do still have some sense of decorum.

Surely Spring must obey her own *Maholo* plaque most days, but this was no ordinary day. Her bunioned feet were still stuffed into the terrycloth slippers she'd shuffled home in. No one could blame her for not allowing her bare skin to contact her dog's sticky remains. She didn't seem to notice her slippers sponging up the blood, or the sucking noise they made under her step. But no way could she overlook the bloody smears on the ivory drywall, or across her traditional tweed sofa, proof of a genuine struggle. Her mouth dangled open in a mute "O," plump hands cupping wet cheeks.

The neighborhood's old biddies clustered like a knitting circle around her. They were all

old biddies, even the men. When I'd first driven through the private streets and witnessed the residents milling about, pushing walkers or riding electric wheelchairs, I wondered if the lunatics had escaped the asylum. I'd considered myself too young to move into this neighborhood at only fifty-nine. But I suppose I'm an old biddy now, too.

A blackberry-jam trail peppered with gray fur clumps splattered across the living room, evidence of the schnauzer's remains. Equally fascinated and repulsed, I followed the chunky path, like the next victim in a horror film. Charlie's body had been dragged from the living room, through the kitchen, and out his gore-smudged doggy door.

I ignored the appalling cluster of old crones, all self-proclaimed "good Christians." They clucked about trapping and poisoning the murderer. *Coyotes*, they gasped in hushed whispers. *Criminals*. One of their God's own creatures! Those hypocrites persistently rung my doorbell every couple weeks. In continuous pursuit of warm bodies for Wednesday night bible study, they'd land on my porch, bound leather bibles clutched to their chests like Kevlar. I opened the door only once. Science has always been my bailiwick. That's what I finally told them.

Inside Charlie's gruesome doggy door, his kibble bowl had been licked clean. Gazing out Spring's window, beyond the low brick wall to the chaparral-blanketed canyon, I wondered. Is a bloody-whiskered coyote eavesdropping on his lynch mob of geezers from behind a shrub?

On the tile floor by my sneaker, a splotch of blood dried, like a scab hemmed in by uneven edges. With creaking knees, I stooped low. My fingerprint slid across its surface, the center of it still slippery as snot.

Who has a doggy door in coyote country anyway? Dogs go out, but dogs come in, too. The old hags huddled, complaining bitterly how our Homeowner Association "absolutely must

solve the coyote problem.” The only problem here was foolish people. After all, coyotes were simply trying to survive in a world where they’ve been outcast.

I slunk home, silent and unnoticed. Once the commotion next door settled, Spring’s curtains closed, sealing her into a barren cubicle of domestication. I perched on my patio swing, like a sentry, watching for him. The murderer. Inhaling the sage-scented still air, I admonished myself a little for savoring the sweet silence so thoroughly. Poor Charlie. His soprano-pitched bark marked his death warrant.

A scout emerged from the shrub, skittish, nostrils flared in the air.

“No pets for you,” I whispered to his perked ears. “There’s a rabid pack of seniors who want your neck, buster.”

He stood still as the moon. If he blinked, it was imperceptible.

Hoisting my stiff bones off the swing, I inched ever-so-slowly to the stunted brick wall separating us. Pausing between steps, trying to mimic his total stillness, I set a chunk of raw steak atop the bricks. Stepping back, I waited, breathing shallow.

Snout low to the ground, he slithered forward and seized the meat with swift teeth, never unlocking his gaze from mine. He turned and dove into the chaparral, juicy flank clamped between his jaws. Fresh, but not fresh kill.

At sunset each night thereafter, I settled onto my swing, pondering the mundane, waiting for Scout. Yellow dishwashing gloves covered my hands. In them, I clung to a used plastic bag from the 99-cent store, heavy with bloody meat.

Nightly, as our eyes adjusted to each other in the bruised dusk, Scout’s silent paws

stepped from his shelter of wild sage. If I moved too close too fast, he'd turn, search behind him. Warning his family, maybe, or confirming his escape route. He'd grab the raw meat and dash into the bushes to share with his brethren, their yips and howls like the laughter of the insane.

Soon, the hungry and timid followed the strong and bold. Sitting their skinny butts down in the dirt, they'd wait. Patient, like a fresh batch of students before repetition had bored the curiosity from them, a dozen mirrored eyes reflected the dark sky back to me.

The soiled thumbnail of a moon tipped toward earth, scooped a path into the horizon. In my swing, I dozed. A ghastly death knell rose from the canyon, sizzled up my neck bone. Adrenalin urged me from my seat. Pulsing moon rays spotlighted the trail's end. The wretched shriek of a cottontail pierced my ear. Rubber gloves still hugged my damp hands. I shed them, tossed them to the concrete patio. With one sneakered paw, I stepped over the low wall onto the fox-tailed dirt. A low growl climbed from my gut as I disappeared into the sage.